

The declining significance of age

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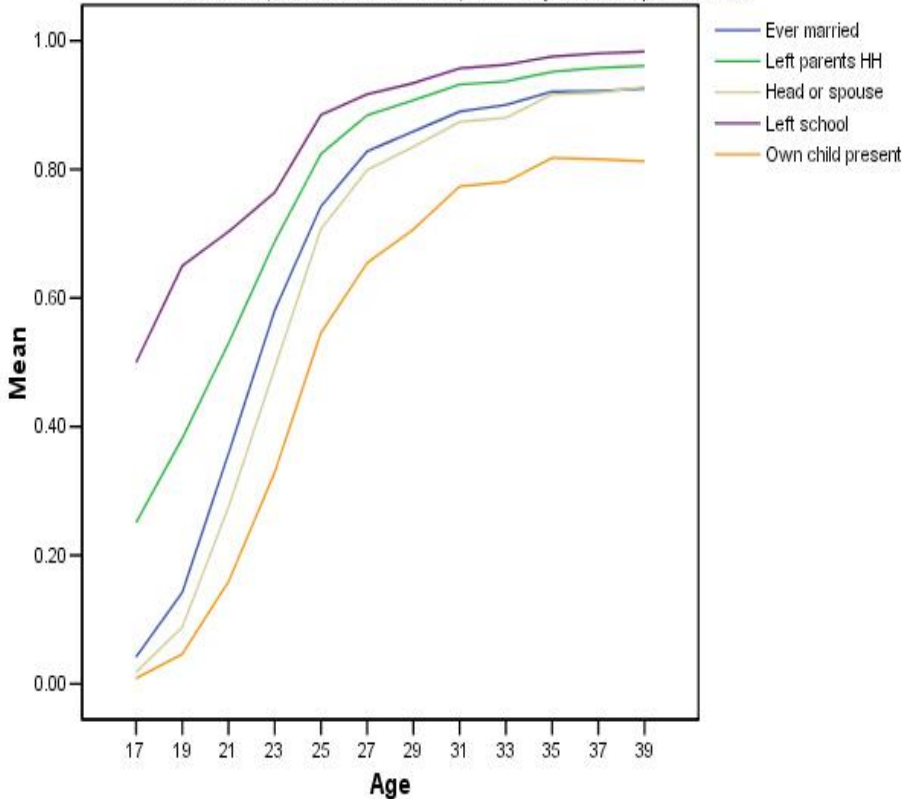
February 2011



Social Impact of the Arts Project

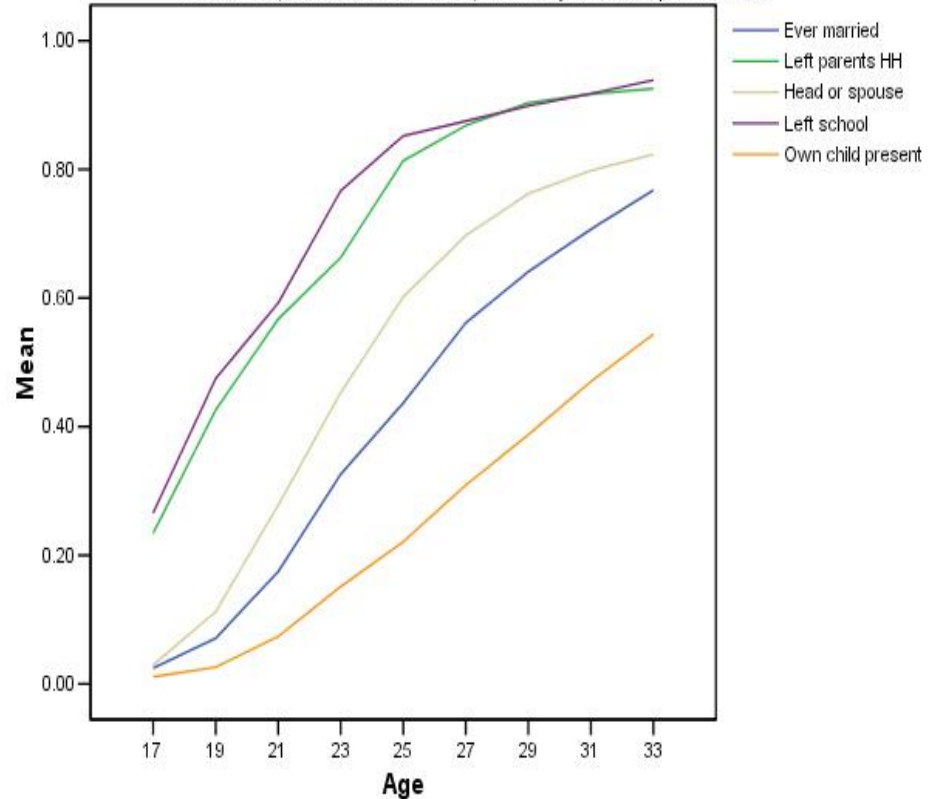
Context: The rise and fall of age standardization

Sex: Male, Year of birth: 1930, Ethnicity: Non-hispanic white



Cases weighted by Person weight

Sex: Male, Year of birth: 1970, Ethnicity: Non-hispanic white

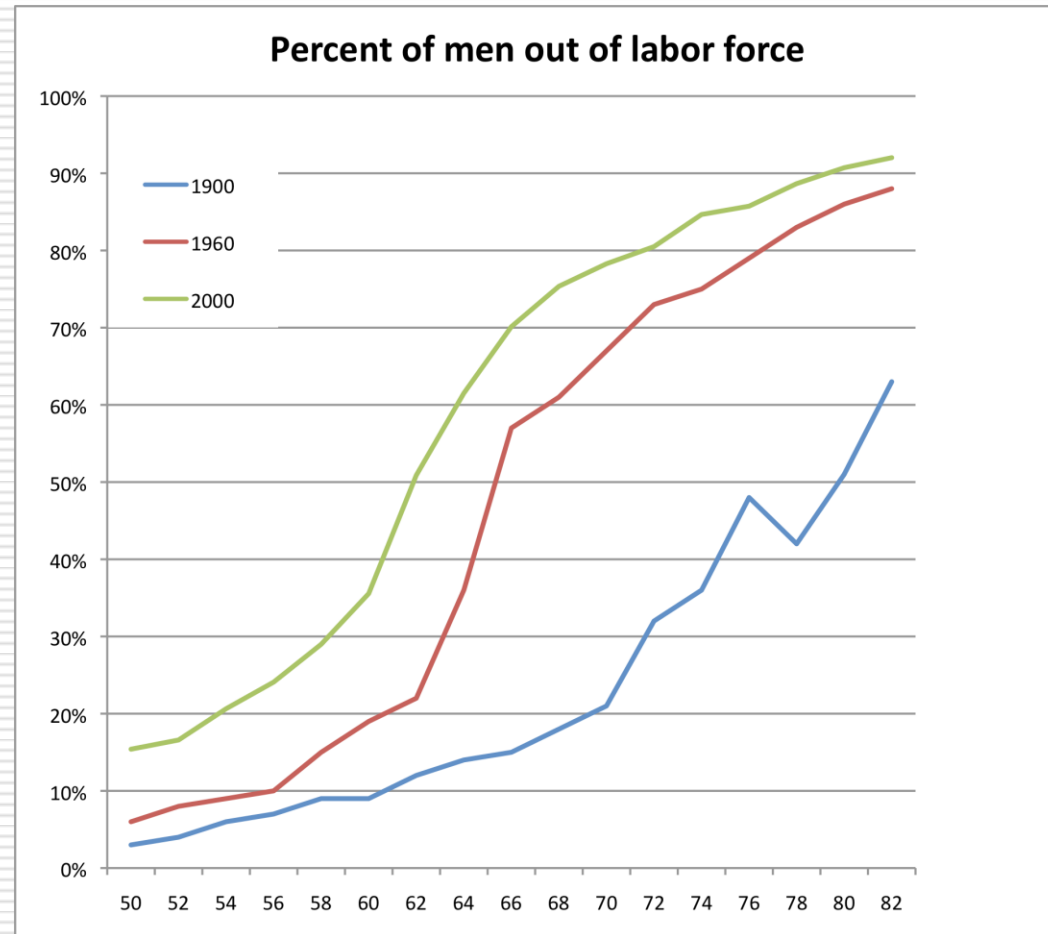


Cases weighted by Person weight

Between 1900 and the 1960s, American social life—like the transition to adulthood—became more standardized. Since the 1970s, age has become a less reliable predictor of how Americans will behave.

Similar trends have influenced older Americans

Older Americans work and family life became more standardized at mid-century, but have become more flexible in recent decades.



Age standardization and culture

- “Cultural capital” theorists argued that cultural engagement was strongly influenced by one’s place in the social structure
 - Richard Peterson’s discovery of “cultural omnivores” demonstrated that the social structural determinants of cultural engagement were declining
 - More recent work—including Brown and Novak-Leonard’s monograph—suggests that this process of *de-structuring* cultural engagement has continued.
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Two more narrow statistical points

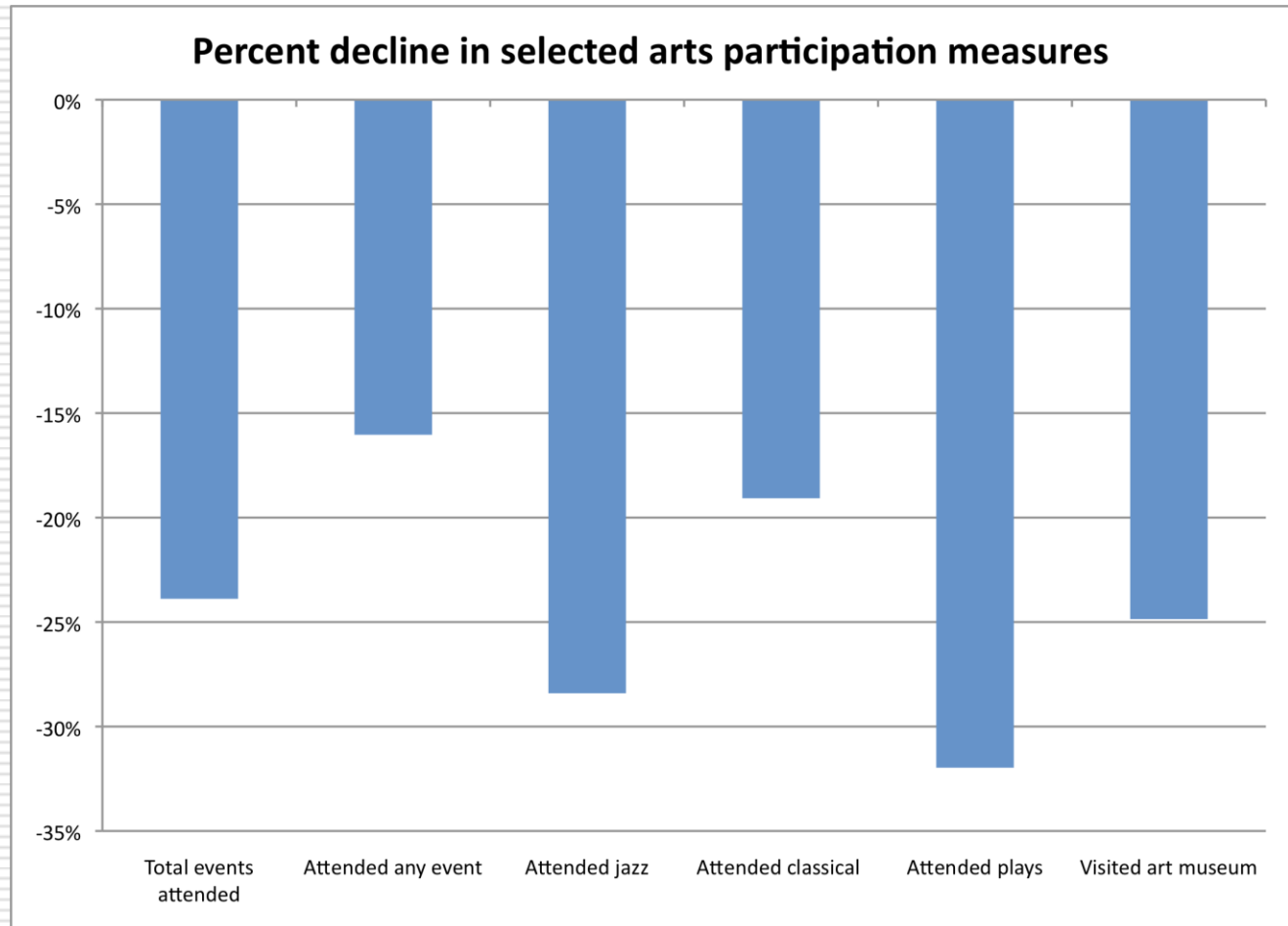
- While *average* participation appears to be related with age, in fact, this relationship is quite weak.
- If we statistically *control* for other variables, this already weak relationship becomes even weaker.

Approach

- Used all SPPA's since 1982
- Dependent variables:
 - Attendance
 - Reading
 - Personal and media participation
- Independent variables:
 - Age: typically five-year groups
 - Birth cohorts
 - World War II
 - Early baby-boom
 - Late baby-boom
 - Generation X

I'll focus on
attendance data in this
presentation

Measures of attendance at arts events has declined sharply since 1992

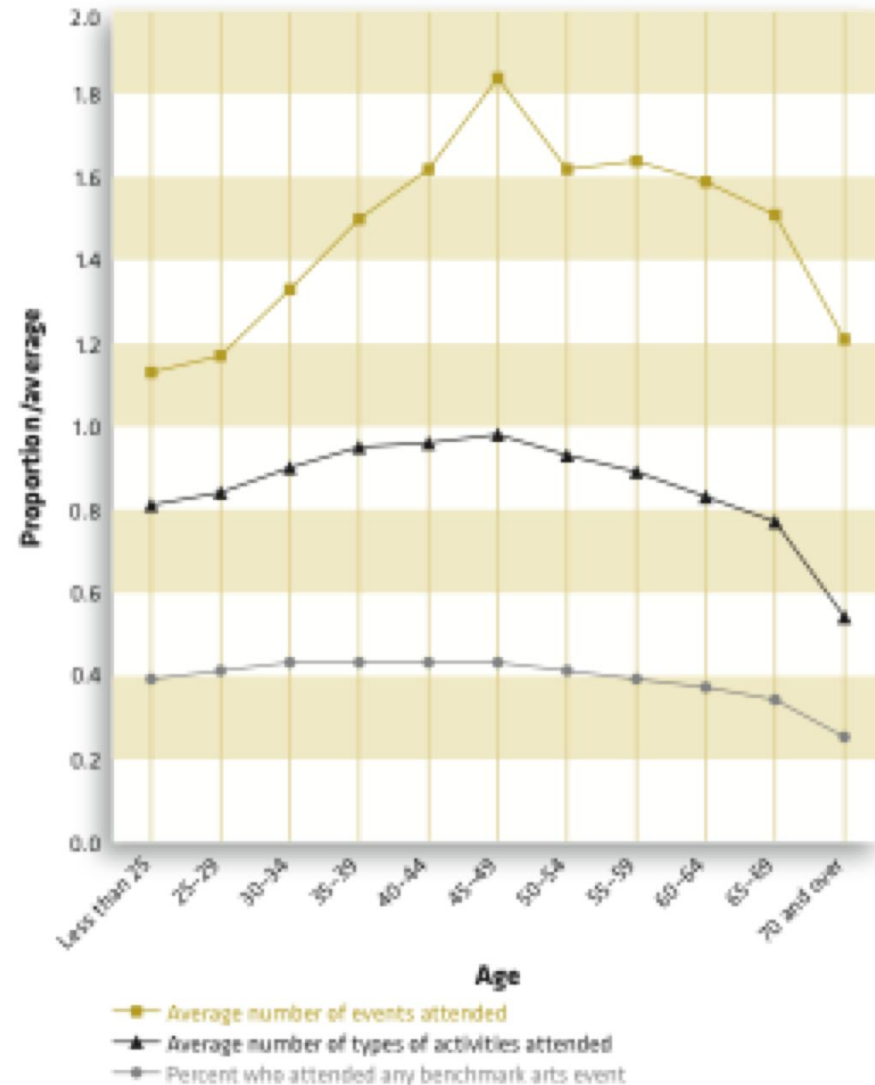


clear age/participation profile

If participation falls with age and the population is aging, participation will fall.

FIGURE A

Indices of arts participation by age, U.S. adults, 1982-2008

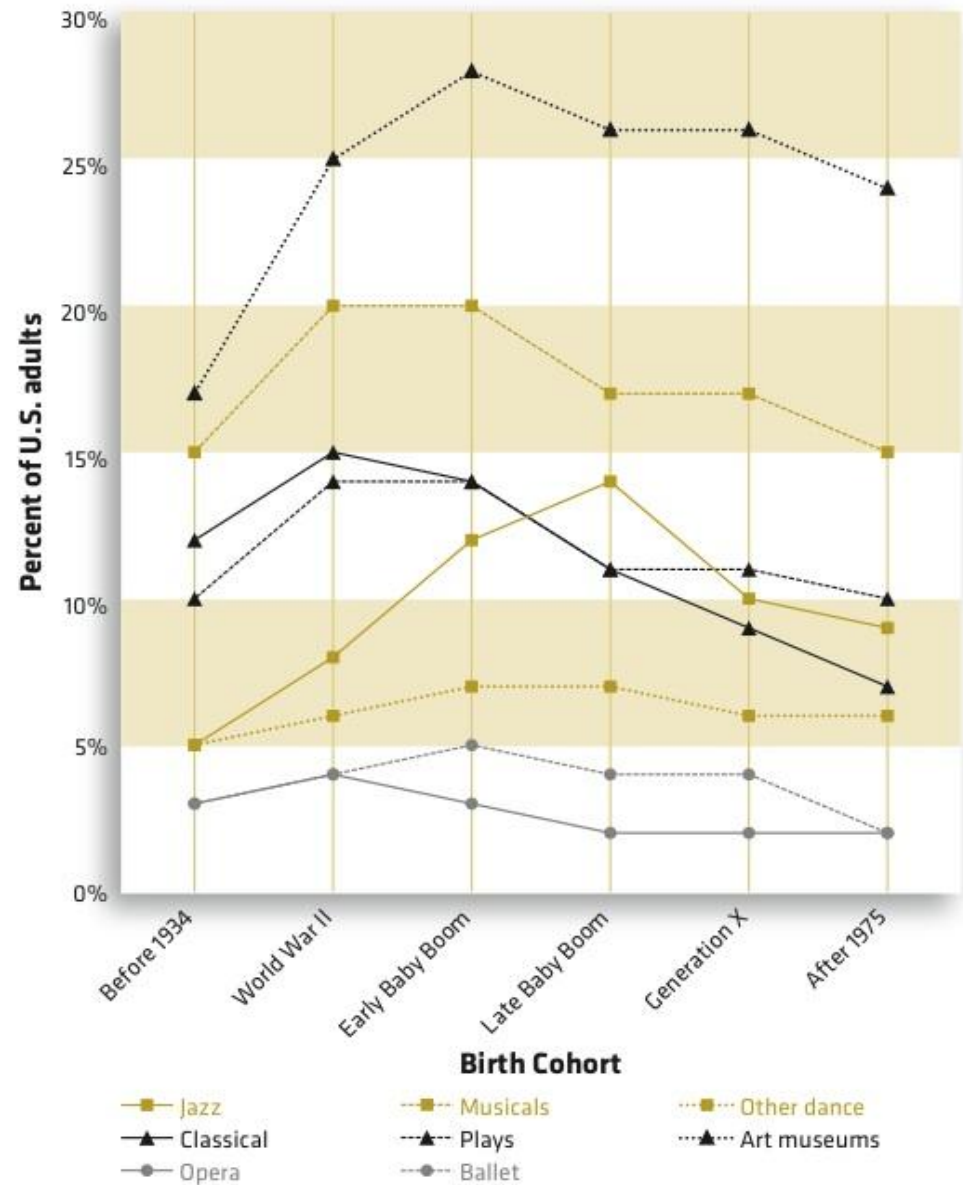


Source: Author's calculations from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 1982-2008 combined file.

Different birth cohorts, too, appear to have distinctive relationships to participation.

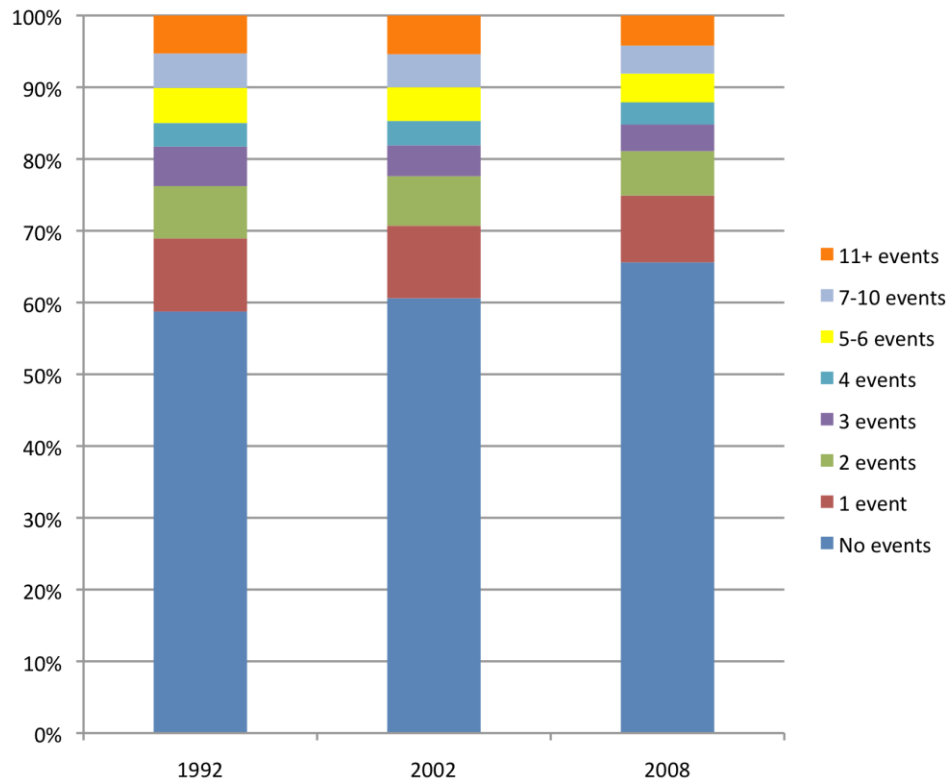
FIGURE B

Percent of U.S. adults who attended different types of events, by cohort, 1982–2008

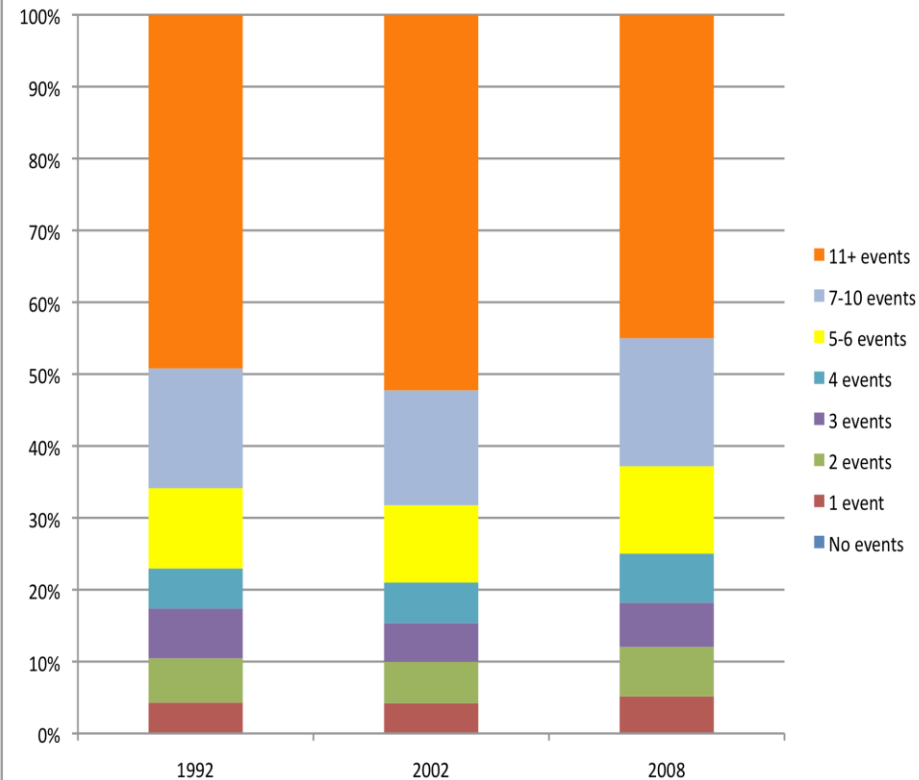


Problem #1: A highly skewed distribution

Percent of US adults by frequency of attendance

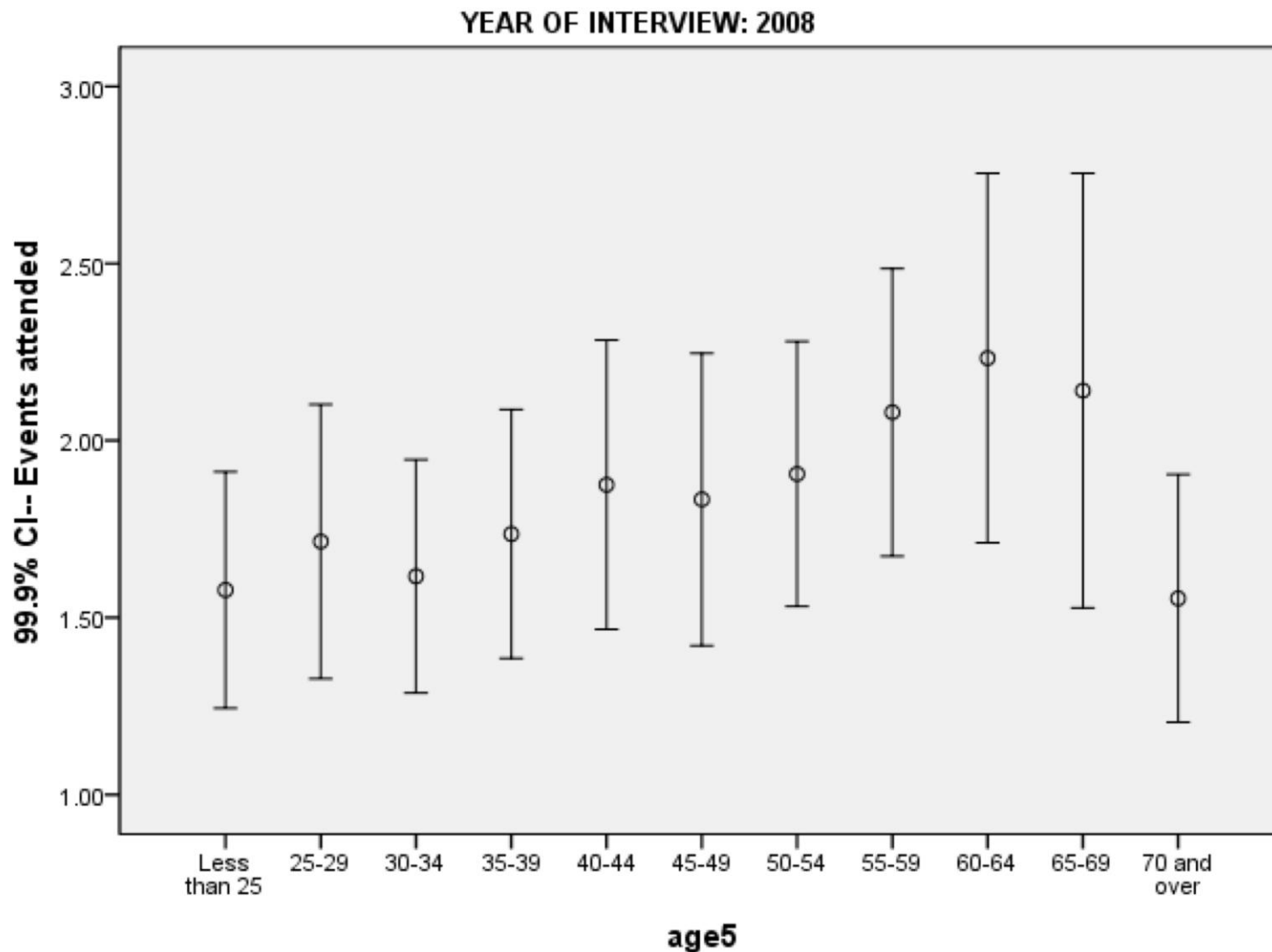


Percent of events attended by frequency of attendance



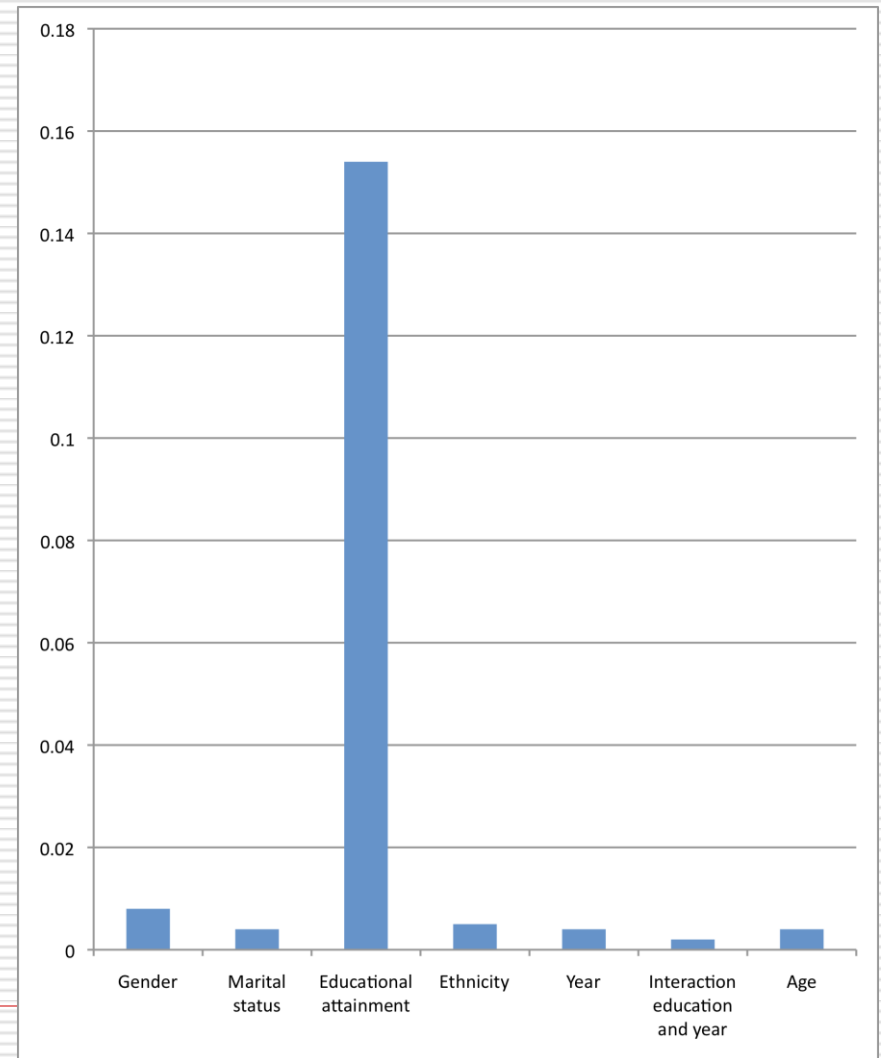
The top 10 percent of attendees account for the vast majority of events attended

Problem #2: As a result, we need to consider not just the averages, but the role of sampling error around the averages



Problem #3: Other variables have a much stronger relationship than age and cohort

If we statistically control for other variables, age has a very small influence on levels of participation and does not improve our ability to predict participation. Educational attainment and gender are much more powerful influences.



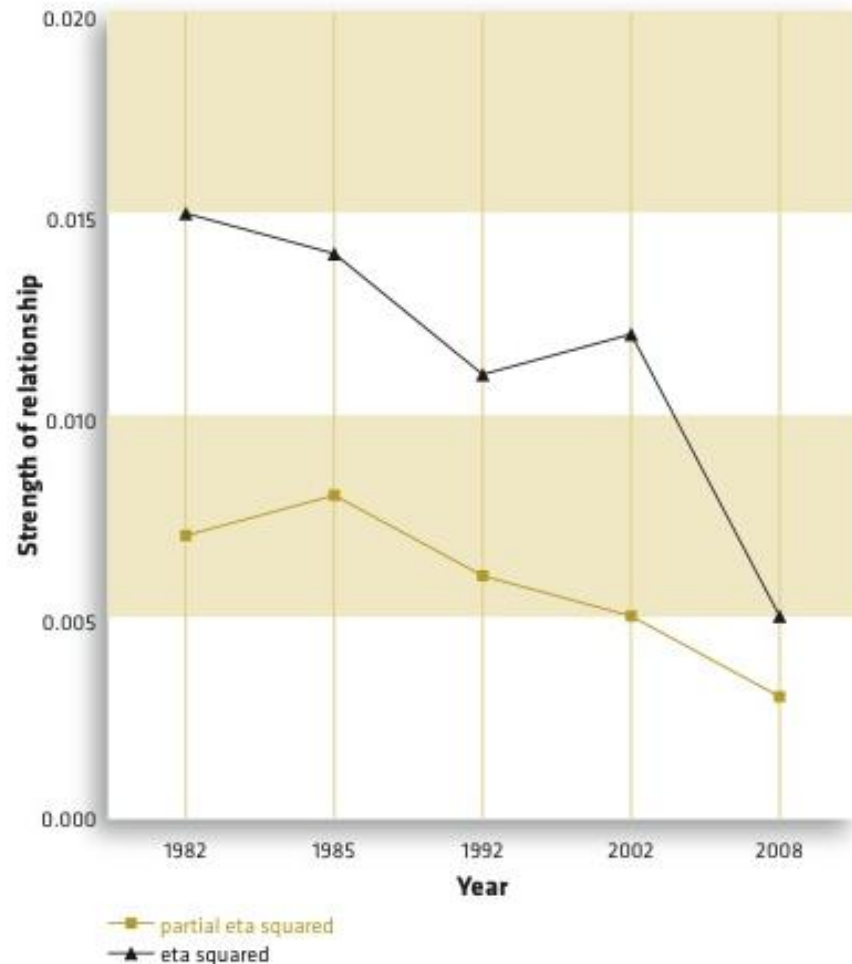
Note: General linear model analysis of number of activities attended, partial eta-squared

Problem #4: Age and birth cohort's influence is getting weaker over time

In 1982, the age of respondent “explained” about 1.5 percent of variance in attendance. In 2008, it explained 0.5 percent.

FIGURE 8

Strength of relationship between age and average activities attended by U.S. adults, uncontrolled and controlling for other variables, 1982–2008



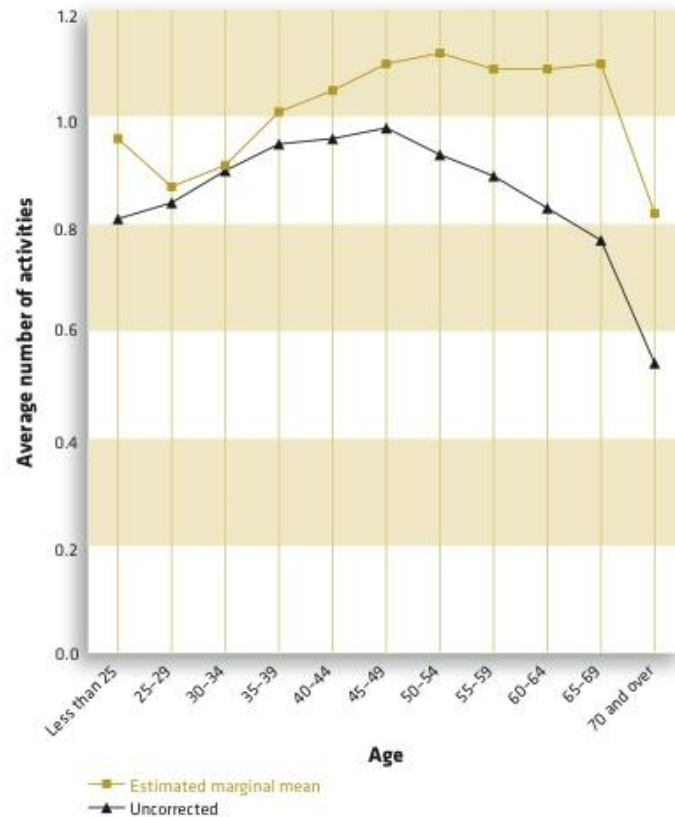
Source: Author's calculations from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 1982–2008 combined file.

Note: General linear model analysis results, controlled for gender, marital status, educational attainment, ethnicity, and year of survey. See Table 11 for detailed results.

Problem #5: When we control for the influence of other variables, the apparent decline in attendance between the ages of 45 and 69 disappears.

FIGURE 7

Average number of activities attended by U.S. adults, by age, uncontrolled and controlling for other variables



Source: Author's calculations from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 1982-2008 combined file.

Note: General linear model analysis results, controlled for gender, marital status, educational attainment, ethnicity, and year of survey. See Table 11 for detailed results.

Another angle: types of participants

- Following Richard Peterson's concepts:
 - Omnivores—frequent consumers of varied types of programs
 - High-brows—frequent consumers of classical music, ballet, art museums, and opera.

Decline in prevalence of omnivores and high brow participants

TABLE 13
Types of arts participants, by year

		1982	1985	1992	2002	2008	Total
Nonparticipants	Count	10,517	8557	7804	10,825	12,391	50,094
	Percent	61.0%	62.6%	61.3%	63.2%	67.2%	63.2%
Omnivores	Count	2612	1897	1740	2173	1866	10,288
	Percent	15.1%	13.9%	13.7%	12.7%	10.1%	13.0%
High brow	Count	1156	982	907	1008	977	5030
	Percent	6.7%	7.2%	7.1%	5.9%	5.3%	6.3%
Other	Count	2969	2238	2285	3129	3210	13831
	Percent	17.2%	16.4%	17.9%	18.3%	17.4%	17.5%
Total	Count	17,254	13,674	12,736	17,135	18,444	79,243
	Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

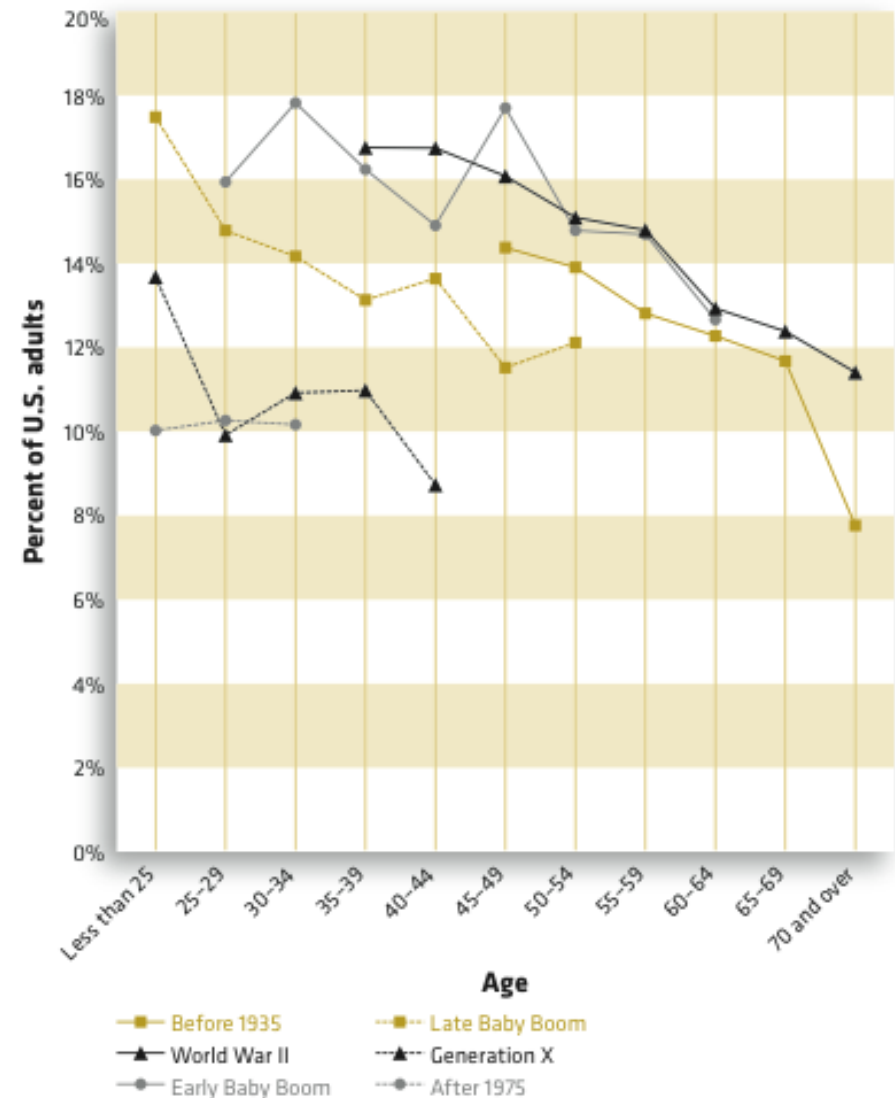
Source: Author's calculations from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 1982–2008 combined file.

Note: See text for explanation

Prevalence of omnivores has declined both with age and across birth cohorts.

FIGURE D

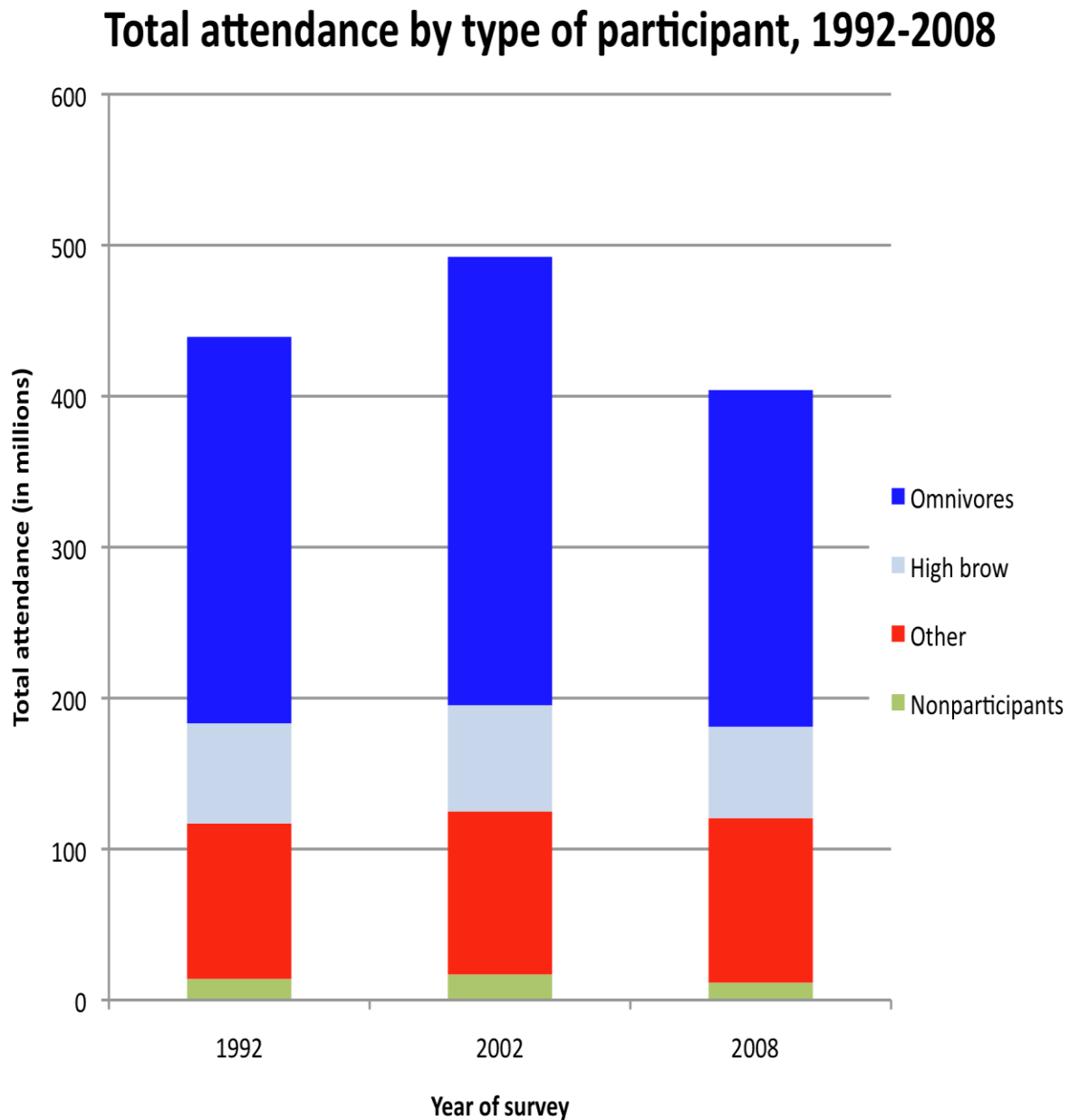
Percent of U.S. adults classified as omnivores, by age and birth cohort



Source: Author's calculations from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 1982-2008 combined file.

Note: See text and appendix for explanation of classification procedure

Using the SPPA to estimate aggregate attendance for the US adult population, the decline in the number of omnivores and in their rate of attendance accounted for 84 percent of the decline in arts attendance between 2002 and 2008.



Why do we continue to think age explains so much?

- Cultural lag: our way of thinking about the organization of social life lags behind our reality
 - Pink Rhinoceros and White Bears: Like the social psychology experiments in “thought suppression,” we can’t help using age and birth cohort as our lens for understanding the arts
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